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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in response to a request from the Illinois State Board of Education to examine closely which reading programs work best for Illinois students and schools. In some Illinois schools, students exhibit consistently high levels of reading achievement--the teaching, learning, and other practices of these schools may point the way to improved reading instruction across the state. The study examined the characteristics of reading programs at schools where students have demonstrated consistently high achievement in reading in grades 1-12. For the study's purposes, "high-achieving" schools are defined as schools scoring in the top 5% of Illinois public schools on the Illinois Goals Assessment Program reading test as well as high performance on a second standardized measure of achievement. Data collection instruments were developed, sites were selected and visited, and data were synthesized, analyzed, and reported. Ten schools participated in the study--3 elementary, 4 middle school/junior high, and 3 high schools; total student population for schools participating was 8,567. Findings suggest there is no one best way to teach reading and that student engagement in learning is valued above curriculum plans and materials. Additionally, classroom teachers (and students) benefit greatly from strong leadership and administrative support as well as from being involved in planning school programs and resource allocations. A key finding was that exemplary programs provide students with many opportunities to read and write during the school day. Includes 11 tables. Appended are: final study list of sites and master list of sites; and data collection instruments. (Contains 11 tables and 44 references.) (NKA)

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NCREL North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

ED 480 092

Prepared by

North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

Oak Brook, Illinois
for

The Illinois State Board of Education

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Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

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Prepared by Mary Foertsch of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Oak Brook, Illinois, for the Illinois State Board of Education

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Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Introduction

Pathways Home

This study was conducted in response to a request from the Illinois State Board of Education to examine closely what reading programs work best for Illinois students and schools. In some Illinois schools, students exhibit consistently high levels of reading achievement. The teaching, learning, and other practices of these schools may point the way to improved reading instruction across the state.

The study examines the characteristics of reading programs at schools whose students have demonstrated consistently high achievement in reading (high scores on the state-mandated reading subtest). It looks at teaching and learning in Grades 1 through 12. For the purposes of this study, "high-achieving" schools are defined as schools scoring in the top 5 percent of Illinois public schools on the Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP) reading test as well as high performance on a second standardized measure of achievement.

NCREL proposed to conduct an intensive evaluation for the Illinois State Board of Education that would identify, analyze, and report on the reading programs of high-achieving schools from across Illinois's diverse school system--rural, urban, suburban, wealthy, middle class, low income--and in communities from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The foremost goal of this study is to present accurate, timely, and appropriate information to guide reading program planning, implementation, and supports at the state level. This information will also help local schools and districts better understand the types of programs being used by high-performing schools and how they have been implemented.

Design of the Study

This study was designed to:

- Examine effective instructional program characteristics and organizational features.
- Draw upon the expertise of teachers, administrators, and district staff of high-performing schools.
- Incorporate site visits that included interviews about program content and implementation and cost, as well as the collection of artifacts related to program implementation.
- Obtain a preliminary picture of program breadth and depth, and gather information that would complement the findings of the site visits.

We conducted the study in three phases:

- **Phase I: Development of Data Collection Instruments and Selecting Sites.** We identified schools

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demonstrating consistently high performance on the Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP) for the past three years (1994-1996) and developed the data collection instruments.

- **Phase II: Site Visits.** We conducted one- to two-day site visits at participating schools during which teachers, administrators, and other school staff were interviewed, a questionnaire was administered, and artifacts were collected.

- **Phase III: Synthesizing, Analyzing, and Reporting Data.** We distilled information about effective programs from site interviews, questionnaire responses, and artifact collections; and wrote the report, providing conclusions and recommendations.

By gathering descriptive data from the interviews and artifact collections, and obtaining data from the questionnaire, our methodology provided us with both qualitative and quantitative information about the characteristics of reading programs and instructional approaches in high- performing schools. We synthesized the data within three contexts: program structure, implementation, and program cost.

Whenever possible, we made site visits to a carefully selected sample of high-performing public schools located in urban, suburban, and rural settings. We focused on schools rather than individual classrooms because policies affecting reading programs are usually implemented schoolwide and student performance on the state-mandated test is the result of the cumulative effect of years of effective teaching and learning. Our study sites represent a range of economics, geography, and demography.

During each site visit, the researcher interviewed staff and gathered documentation and artifacts from teachers, students, program coordinators, and administrators. We also either collected questionnaires we had distributed previously or administered the questionnaire to teachers during the site visit. Finally, profiles of the sites were created describing the three areas of primary interest for this study: program structure, implementation, and cost.

Organization of the Report

The rest of this report is structured as follows:

- **Background of the Study:** Summarizes the findings of related reading research that influenced the research questions that guide this study.

- **Design and Methodology:** Describes the research methods including the research team, the development of data collection instruments for the site visits and the teacher survey, and the procedures for gathering and analyzing the data.

- **Findings:** Reports a synthesis of data gathered through site visits and an analysis of the teacher questionnaire and interview as well as the artifacts collected.

- **Conclusions and Recommendations:** Interprets the key findings, suggests areas where additional research is needed, and presents recommendations for funding agencies and schools.

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Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Background of the Study

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Overview

We reviewed the relevant research literature prior to conducting the study in order to establish a research base from which to describe different approaches to reading instruction, as well as to help inform our thinking about the issues being examined. We also wanted to sharpen the focus of our research questions so that we could develop research instruments that would provide us with the most useful information possible.

Our review of the literature revealed a number of promising practices for the improvement of reading and writing. Many of these practices have emerged from classroom-based studies of young children's literacy development that have shown that traditional reading instruction can be updated and restructured to serve students more effectively. We also know from a review of the literature that most programs come with a price tag attached--whether it be for the purchase of materials, ongoing professional development, or both.

As we designed this study, we tried to balance the purpose of the study, which is to identify the characteristics of reading/language arts programs that have a positive impact on teaching and learning, with the extensive information available about the issues related to implementing and sustaining successful programs. Regardless of the program, realizing program goals and putting the program into place require complex strategies. Every implementation is context-specific and shaped by a range of factors, such as instructional approach and materials, as well as time and program cost. The following review of the literature is divided into these two areas.

Instructional Approach and Materials

This section describes approaches to reading instruction and materials for engaging students in reading and writing. Both the instructional approach and materials play important roles in shaping student learning.

Instructional Approach. The question of how best to teach children to read and write has been argued, debated, and researched for decades, and the question still has no definitive answer. Because reading and writing are complex and children and teachers are different, it is unlikely that there is a single best way. Throughout this nation's history, however, four approaches to teaching reading have dominated instruction: the alphabetic approach, the basal approach, the use of trade books, and the language experience approach (Allington & Cunningham, 1996).

Reading instruction began in this country with the alphabetic approach. In this approach, children learn the letters of the alphabet and learn to spell and sound out the letters of words. Eventually, this alphabetic method came to be called a phonics approach and has gone in and out of favor. It has, however, always had advocates

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who insisted it was the only sensible approach to beginning reading instruction. A variety of instructional materials rely heavily on phonics instruction to teach reading.

A second common approach to reading instruction involves the use of basal readers. Most basals include instruction in phonics of some kind. Some basals offer intensive phonics instruction, but most basal programs begin with sight words from predictable stories and place more emphasis on comprehension than on phonics. While basals differ in their emphasis, they all offer stories of gradually increasing difficulty and an emphasis on teacher-guided reading of generally shorter selections (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). The more recent basals offer both full and excerpted selections of children's literature, rather than stories written specially for the series.

Yet another approach involves the use of trade books. In the 1960s, Jeannet Veatch (1959) introduced what she called an individualized reading approach. This approach emphasizes children selecting books they want to read and teachers conferencing with them to provide individual help when needed. In the late 1980s, the trade-book approach became part of a larger whole language movement. Whole language instruction is a total literacy immersion program where the focus is on creating meaning through reading and writing (Harp, 1991).

In the late 1980s, a fourth approach, language experience, which has been more widely used in Australia and other countries, also appeared in U.S. classrooms. This approach is based on the premise that the easiest material for children to read is their own writing and that of their classmates. The stories that children themselves compose, orally or in writing, are the primary reading materials.

Throughout the years, these four major approaches--phonics, basal, trade book, and language experience--have waxed and waned in popularity. Generally, once one approach has dominated long enough for its shortcomings to be recognized, it is replaced by a different approach with different shortcomings. The search for which of these methods is best has led educators to conclude that each method has undeniable strengths.

In the 1960s, Bond and Dykstra (1967) conducted a massive study to determine the best approach to beginning reading. Data were collected from first- and second-grade classrooms around the country that used a variety of approaches to beginning reading. The study results were inconclusive. Virtually every approach had some good results and some poor results. How well teachers carried out an approach seemed to be the major determinant of how well it worked. Some teachers used what the researchers called "combination approaches," such as language experience and basal or phonics and literature or literature and writing. The study concluded that, in general, combination approaches worked better than any single approach. More recently, Adams (1990) also concluded that children need a variety of reading and writing experiences as well as some direct instruction in letter-sound patterns.

Research indicates that explicit decoding instruction and whole language make unique contributions to the development of students' ability to read and write. For example, whole language students understand that writing is for making meaning, whereas students in conventional classrooms may not have this understanding (e.g., Gambrell & Palmer, 1992; Graham & Harris, 1994). Students in whole language classrooms learn that the goal of decoding is to gain understanding of text rather than sounding out words (e.g., Freppon, 1991; Mills, O'Keefe, & Stephens, 1990). Placing young children in whole language environments that invite and support literacy stimulates children to do things that are literate (Morrow, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1990). When literature drives instruction, as it does in whole language, there are positive effects on students' use of literature and attitudes toward reading (e.g., Morrow, 1992; Morrow, O'Connor, & Smith, 1990). Consistent experiences with high-quality literature foster growth in understanding story structure, which improves comprehension and writing (e.g., Morrow, 1992; Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1986). Extensive experiences with stories expand children's knowledge of the world, as reflected in the breadth of their vocabulary (e.g., Robbins & Ehri, 1994). In summary, immersion in reading and writing provides great benefits for young readers and writers.

Research also indicates that word decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension abilities may not develop adequately without direct explicit decoding instruction (Stahl, McKenna, & Pagnucco, 1994; Stahl & Miller, 1989). Development of letter-sound associations and explicit decoding instruction focusing on the sounds of

words is definitely associated with later reading success (Adams, 1990). Especially with respect to the weakest beginning readers, the case is strong that explicit decoding instruction increases reading competence (Adams, 1990; Mather, 1992; Pressley & Rankin, 1994).

Recently, research on the inclusion of strategy and skill instruction in whole language teaching has begun to take shape (Delpit, 1986, 1988, 1991; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995). It does not signal a return to the direct instruction and drill of isolated skills. Nor does it necessarily mean an eclectic approach to teaching. Rather, it is instruction on strategies and skills taught within meaningful contexts so that instruction does not conflict with the principles of whole language instruction.

Our study was designed to investigate the types of approaches to reading/language arts instruction in exemplary programs. This review of the literature served to increase our awareness of the variety of approaches available.

Materials. Curricular emphases come and go in what appear to be 30-year-cycles (Langer & Allington, 1992). But curriculum materials can play an important role in shaping the nature of classroom instruction. Elementary school reading and language arts materials include a spectrum of different resources including basal reader series; trade books; skill books; software; student-produced work; and everyday reading matter such as newspapers, magazines, directions, and lists.

Most schools rely heavily on materials developed by someone other than individual classroom teachers. These curriculum materials include basal reader series, state-mandated grade-level lists of core trade books that children are to read, sets of big books, predictable book kits, trade-book sets with accompanying chapter questions and vocabulary lists, software, and skill packages produced and marketed by commercial publishers. Some of these sets of materials are comprehensive, with the organizational plan spanning K-6 levels, while other sets are far more narrowly targeted: sets of predictable language books, for instance, organized into six levels of difficulty for first-grade classrooms, or computer software promoted as improving reading comprehension skills.

Although we had a sense of what materials are currently being used to teach reading going into this study, this literature review helped to remind us of the range of available materials.

Time and Program Cost

In this section, we begin with a brief review of the importance of time allocations for reading/language arts instruction and conclude with a discussion of cost factors.

Time. Time is an important consideration in teaching and learning. There has been a great deal of research on the quantity of time American children spend in school, usually in relation to the time children in other nations spend in school. Classroom research has often been reported on time allocations in teaching--of the time that is available. Teachers are often heard to complain that there is not enough time to do all that should be done.

Schools with lower reading achievement have been found to routinely allocate less time for reading instruction than schools with higher reading achievement (Birman, 1988). One characteristic of low-income schools that exceed expected achievement levels is that substantial blocks of time are allocated for literacy teaching and learning (Knapp, 1991).

The amount of time spent on-task in relation to the type of literacy activity that students are engaged in is important. It does matter what kinds of work students spend their time doing. Classrooms differ enormously in the amount of time students spend engaged in actual reading and writing activities. One federal study of schools in three states that served many low-income children (Knapp, 1991) noted that in some classrooms children actually read only minutes daily while in other classrooms children averaged 48 minutes of actual reading each day. A similar pattern of variability exists in writing activity. In some classrooms, children did fewer than one

extended writing activity each week, and in other classrooms children averaged eight. Schools with higher achievement levels had more teachers offering longer blocks of time for both reading and writing. But many teachers do not have a good idea of how much time they should allocate to reading and writing instruction and few have good information on the amount of time other teachers allocate to reading instruction.

The literature review confirmed our thinking about the importance of time with respect to reading/language arts instruction. We decided to look at time factors with respect to program structure, program support, and cost.

Program Cost. In some classrooms, a considerable amount of time and money is spent on "seat-work" or supplementary materials. Supplementary materials for instruction in reading compose about one-third of the total industry sales and consist of independent workbooks and "skill drill" activities, kits for class or group activities, flash cards and charts, graded books for individual reading, "big books," sometimes "take home" books for parent reading, puppets and other manipulatives, pictures, language games, recordings, audio- and videocassettes, and computer programs (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). For extra practice, many schools and teachers purchase quantities of materials independent of basals, particularly phonics workbooks, worksheets, and, more recently, skill drill activities in comprehension and meaning and vocabulary. Increasingly, ancillary materials, as well as program segments, have been made available for use on microcomputers, but at this time industry statistics indicate only selective uses of computers in teaching reading.

Other factors in determining program cost include salaries and professional development. According to Allington and Cunningham (1996), only 1 to 1.5 percent of the annual school budget is spent supporting the professional development of district employees, while roughly 80 percent of the annual operating budget is invested in salaries.

Reading program costs are difficult to estimate for a number of reasons including lack of awareness of all of the factors entering into program cost, as well as the difficulty of sorting out reading/language arts instruction from other subject matter instruction. The present study attempted to determine the cost of various program features associated with exemplary reading programs.

Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Design and Methodology

Overview

The research was based on two sources of data: (1) site visits to 10 schools across the state to gather qualitative data through interviews and artifact collection, and (2) a two-part teacher questionnaire to gather quantitative data on teachers' self-reported instructional strategies and areas of emphasis. Site visits combined interviews with the collection of program-related documents as well as additional test information. The teacher questionnaire gave us an in-depth perspective on the reading/language arts strategies and skills that receive the most emphasis. Documentation from individual teachers helped to establish a richer context in which instruction actually takes place. We used multiple sources of data to gain the most accurate perspective on the reading/language arts programs of high-performing schools.

We formulated a set of research questions to help frame our research activities and to inform the development of the data collection instruments. The questions focused on three key areas of reading/language arts programs: features, implementation, and cost.

The study was carried out in three phases:

- Phase I: Data Collection Instruments and Site Selection Criteria
- Phase II: Data Collection
- Phase III: Analyzing, Synthesizing, and Reporting the Data

A description of each phase follows.

Phase I: Data Collection Instruments and Site Selection Criteria

The members of our research team settled on a set of questions and issues to address at site visits, wrote protocols to ensure consistency in data collection activities, established a screening interview to be conducted by phone, and discussed ways to obtain information about cost and specific program features.

Four primary research questions guided us in creating the data collection instruments and in analyzing the data. The questions are as follows:

1. What are the critical features of successful reading programs?

2. What contextual factors within schools support and facilitate the implementation of successful reading programs?

3. What skills and strategies are emphasized in successful reading/language arts programs?

4. What is the cost per school for the reading program?

Data Collection Instruments. The following data collection instruments were developed for this study.

Administrator/Teacher/Staff Interview. Researchers included questions about the overall structure of the program, policy decisions affecting program implementation, professional development, support, cost factors.

Telephone Contact Protocol. Researchers asked questions about the availability of information from a second standardized test, school admissions policies, and the possibility of conducting a site visit before the end of the school year.

Site Visit Guidelines. During their site visits to districts, researchers gathered data using the interview form and the teacher questionnaire. In addition, whenever possible, program documentation was gathered for further review.

Teacher Questionnaire. The research team modified a 17-page comprehensive teacher questionnaire developed at the University of Wisconsin Research and Development Center. The first part of the questionnaire included questions pertaining to teachers' grade levels, years of experience teaching, highest degrees achieved, and the use of technology as part of reading/language arts or English/literature instruction. It also included a number of questions about instructional strategies and program implementation.

Part II of the questionnaire was based on the *Benchmarks and Standards in Reading and Language Arts* identified by McREL (1995). The McREL document synthesizes important reading/language arts benchmarks from a number of major documents, such as IRA Standards for Reading/Language Arts, NCTE Standards, NAEP, and so on. We transformed the benchmarks and standards into statements about reading/language arts instruction and learning. Teachers were asked to estimate the amount of time spent teaching a specific skill or strategy during the regular academic year and for those skills that were taught, the type of student engagement required (e.g., conceptual understanding, application to familiar situation, or application to unfamiliar situation).

Site Selection Criteria. The following criteria were used for selecting schools for participation in the ISBE Exemplary Reading Programs study:

1. Public schools whose average adjusted score on the IGAP for the past three years was in the top 5 percent of the schools in the state

2. Schools with nonselective admissions policies

3. Schools demonstrating stable performances across IGAP administrations (1994-1996) at a specific grade level

4. Schools that had available grade-level scores from a second standardized achievement measure (i.e., either a standardized general achievement measure with a reading subtest, or a diagnostic test used for placement or screening purposes)

5. Total sample of selected sites represents a blend of rural, urban, and suburban schools at the elementary,

middle/junior high, and secondary levels; diverse socioeconomic levels; ethnically diverse populations; and different geographic locations

Phase II: Data Collection

Phase II included the following data collection activities:

- Site Selection
- Site visits
- Administration of teacher questionnaire
- Compilation of data and site visit report writing

Site Selection. Ten public schools statewide were selected for and agreed to participate in this project based on the criteria developed and defined in Phase I. Sites were selected from nine different school districts. For the sake of simplicity, all participating schools will be referred to as sites throughout this report.

Mean student achievement scores (1994-1996) from the IGAP for the top 5 percent of schools at Grades 3, 6, 8, and 11 were used to rank order schools from high to low in terms of students' average performance on the reading portion of the IGAP for the past three years. High-performing schools identified as potential study sites within each type of setting were compared with the state profile for that setting. For example, the state profile indicates that urban schools tend to have a higher percentage of minority students and students qualifying for free lunch than either suburban or rural schools. Therefore, we looked for high-performing urban schools that approximated the percentage of students in each of these categories.

Because the percentage of students qualifying for free lunch, the percentage of minority and LEP students, and student mobility are important variables in all types of settings, we took these factors into consideration when selecting sites for the study. We constructed a of high-performing schools at each grade level for which IGAP scores were available (3, 6, 8, 11) within each type of setting (urban, rural, suburban).

In order to determine the stability of student performance, we plotted IGAP reading scores across the last three available test administrations (1994-1996). Schools with consistently high performances were potential study sites.

Anticipating that it might be difficult to solicit schools to participate in a study taking place at the end of a school year, we compiled a list of the names, addresses, and phone numbers of principals and district superintendents of at least five sites for each grade and type of setting. Schools on the final master list were ranked according to the order in which they were to be contacted. Researchers used a telephone protocol when contacting schools. The protocol briefly explained the purpose of the study, how schools were selected, and the requirements for participation. As part of our initial phone contact with a school, we conducted a short screening interview to ask whether schools were highly selective in terms of student admissions and whether they had available a second standardized measure of student achievement. In an effort to make the results of this study as generalizable as possible, we did not want schools with selective admissions policies in the sample. We also needed a second achievement score to corroborate the IGAP scores. If schools had selective admissions criteria or did not have a second standardized measure of achievement available, they were not invited to participate in the study.

Profile of Selected Schools. A total of 10 schools agreed to participate in the study: three at the elementary level, four at the middle school/junior high level, and three at the high-school level. An additional school was added at the middle/junior high level because one of our elementary sites was also identified as a high-

achieving middle school site, and we felt that it would be valuable to look at program implementation across grade levels in a high-achieving school.

Recognizing that student achievement is not the sole responsibility of the teacher at the grade level at which the test is administered, we made every attempt to include at least one teacher for the prior grade level. At the elementary level, we invited the third-grade teachers (the grade at which the IC AP is administered) as well as the first- and second-grade teachers to participate in the study. At the middle/junior high school level we invited sixth-grade teachers (the grade at which the IGAP is administered) as well as other middle school teachers. At the high school level, we left decisions about who should participate up to the discretion of the school principal.

All of the participants felt that it was possible to complete questionnaires, interviews, and the collection of artifacts on a very short timeline. However, many felt that it would not be possible for us to observe instruction because of end of semester/quarter examinations, field trips, and other end-of-year activities that were not a part of regular classroom activity.

In total, the combined student population for all schools participating in the study was 8,567. Schools ranged in size from very large (two schools with over 2,000 students) to very small (four schools with fewer than 400), with a range of 212 to 2,700 students (Table 1). The average school population in the sample was 779 students.

Table 1: Student Enrollment of Sample Schools

Type of School	Total Student Enrollment
Elementary	
Urban (K-8)	528
Suburban (K-5)	389
Rural (K-6)	309
Middle/Junior High	
Urban (K-8)	460
(K-6)	466
Suburban (5-8)	448
Rural (K-6)	309
(7-12)	212
Secondary	
Urban (9-12)	2,700
Suburban (9-12)	2,194
Rural (9-12)	552

Schools in the sample were classified as being high-, middle-, or low-income according to the following criteria:

- Low income was defined as having a median income of less than $25,000 per year and more than 20 percent of the students being eligible for free or reduced lunches.
- Middle income was defined as having a median income of $25,000 to $50,000 per year and 10 percent to

20 percent of the students being eligible for free or reduced lunches, and

- High income was defined as having a median income of more than $50,000 per year and less than 10 percent of the students being eligible for free or reduced lunches.

Three of the ten schools in the sample were classified as low income, six schools were classified as middle income, and one school met the criteria for high income.

Every attempt was made to identify schools that would reflect approximately the same percentage of ethnic minorities and low-income students as the state average per type of demographic area.[1]

Conducting the Site Visits. Researchers visited each school for one day. At each school, administrators were asked to select teachers to participate in the study from each grade level who would be knowledgeable about the program implementation within the school. At some schools, it was not possible to speak with a teacher at each grade level due to scheduling conflicts and prior commitments made by teachers. However, at most sites, researchers spoke with teachers from at least one grade level prior to the IGAP grade tested.

Researchers collected data through interviews with key administrators and teachers, and through documents relevant to the reading/language arts program. The visits followed the protocol and procedures described in Phase I and described in the Data Collection Instruments and Site Selection Criteria section.

A team of four researchers collaborated on the design of the study. Two researchers studied two schools each; the third researcher studied four schools; and the fourth researcher studied three schools.

Each researcher became as familiar as possible (given the time constraints of the project) with the ongoing activities and points of view of school staff in a variety of roles. The specific data collection activities included the following:

- **Preliminary Phone Interviews.** The initial call made to each school's principal and/or district superintendent included gathering information about the school's admissions policy; the availability of a second standardized achievement measure; and the availability of teachers, reading specialists, and program coordinators to participate in interviews, artifact collection, and questionnaire completion. We also needed to schedule an appointment with the principal to gather program cost information as well as information about school and program structure.

- **Site Interviews.** Researchers spoke with teachers, administrators, program coordinators, and reading specialists. Relatively formal interviews were held by appointment at the school with only the interviewer and interviewee present and lasted for approximately one hour. Less formal interviews included spontaneous, short conversations with teachers between classes and a brief conversation with the principal over the phone. Recording methods included hand-written notes (taken during the interview) and audiotapes. We found that most individuals were eager to speak with us about their program and made an attempt to accommodate teachers' schedules to the fullest extent possible. All of the interviews for a particular site were conducted by a single interviewer. Interviews typically lasted 30-45 minutes. After gathering summary information on specific program components and practices, the interviewer collected a brief demographic overview of the site. The remainder of the interview focused on issues related to program cost, such as resources, professional development, materials, and so on.

- **Document Collection.** Study participants gave us copies of some of the records of their efforts. Lesson plans, student portfolios, lists of materials (including software), and other documents related to the reading program contributed to data on current teaching and school organization. Documents were collected on an informal, voluntary basis.

- **Teacher Questionnaire.** Each teacher in the study was asked to complete a lengthy two-part

questionnaire (see Appendix B). The first part of the questionnaire focused on teacher background characteristics and general classroom and instructional information. Part II of the questionnaire consisted of a detailed accounting of time spent on teaching specific reading skills and strategies. Teachers were to estimate the amount of time spent on teaching each skill or strategy and then estimate the amount of time spent by purpose. For example, if a teacher indicated spending 20 or more hours per year teaching inferential comprehension, he or she would be asked the extent to which that time was devoted to teaching for conceptual understanding, application or practice in a familiar context, and application in a new or novel context. Teachers were offered the option of combining questionnaire completion with the site interview, if they felt they needed the researcher's assistance in completing the questionnaire. Whenever possible, questionnaires were sent a week in advance to the school principal or program coordinator, with a cover letter to the principal, for distribution to participating teachers. Schools either returned the questionnaires to the researcher visiting the site or returned them directly to NCREL.

Each researcher organized the data collected and wrote a brief summary report. The report was keyed to the research questions and summarized information collected through interviews and discussions concerning document collection.

Phase III: Data Analysis and Reporting

Interviews and questionnaires were the two major sources of data for helping us to identify the characteristics of effective reading/language arts programs. Site visit interviews and questionnaires were used to derive a key list of program elements; documents provided an additional source of information.

In order to identify instructional practices and program characteristics common across sites, we developed a matrix that included a list of key elements along one axis and the sites along another. We tabulated the presence of these elements across the sites, which helped us to summarize and describe programs for the Descriptive Findings chapter of this report.

The teacher questionnaire provided extensive, descriptive data and further elaborated information gathered at the sites. The analysis of the teacher questionnaire involved summarizing the data according to the research questions (for example, training, impact on students, and so on), and exploring similarities and differences occurring among teachers at different school levels (elementary, middle, secondary) and occurring in demographic areas (urban, suburban, rural). After reviewing the data, we determined that in some cases it was appropriate to report percentages of all teachers responding. However, in other cases it seemed more appropriate to report the percentages of teachers who responded to a particular item.

Research staff examined the site visit interview information, site visit reports, and teacher questionnaires for effective practices and barriers to effective practice, as well as for consistency between the reports and questionnaires.

[1] National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) school-level locale codes were used to classify school locations as urban, suburban, or rural. The NCES locale code is computed at the school level making it possible for a school district to contain schools with different locale codes. These differences are most ofter observed for rural districts near large urban centers.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) locale code requires that each school within a district have the same locale code. District codes are based on the classification of the school within the district with the highest student population. Communities surrounding urban areas will always be classified as urban.

Due to differences between the NCES and ISBE processes for assigning school-level locale codes, all of the secondary schools in our sample would be classified as suburban, and one of our middle schools currently

classified as urban would be reclassified as suburban according to ISBE. For the purposes of this study, however, we have selected sites and reported data using NCES school locale codes.

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NCREL North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Descriptive Findings

Pathways Home

Overview

This section presents the key findings, background information from the teacher questionnaire, and the findings in the three areas of reading/language arts programs that were studied: structure, implementation, and cost.

The information about reading/language arts programs reported here is based on the information collected during the site visits and from the teacher questionnaire. Teacher questionnaire data is reported as percentages of respondents, as a fraction of respondents, or as percentages of teachers responding to a particular question. Site visit interview data is reported as percentages or numbers of all schools responding when the data represent common program elements. In the profiles of exemplary practice, the program of a particular school is elaborated on with anecdotal information and information obtained from the document analysis.

The teacher questionnaire focused on teacher background as well as issues of program structure, support, and implementation. We distributed questionnaires to teachers at all 10 of the schools in our study. We received completed questionnaires from 30 teachers.

The completed questionnaires represented a cross-section of teachers based both on grade levels taught and years of experience teaching. Nearly half (47%) of the teachers who completed the questionnaire were elementary level teachers (grades 1-4), 30 percent taught middle/junior high school (grades 5-8), and 23 percent taught high school (grades 9-12). Teachers were also fairly evenly distributed with respect to years of teaching experience across all levels. Approximately 37 percent taught for 10 years or less, another 17 percent for 10-20 years, and the final 46 percent for more than 20 years. All respondents taught reading/language arts (English/writing at the high school level) and were involved in helping students read better. Nearly half (47%) of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire reported having a bachelor's degree, and the other half (53%) reported having a master's degree or higher.

Across the 10 sites, a total of 45 school staff members were interviewed including teachers, principals, program coordinators, and reading specialists. At the elementary level, we interviewed one teacher from each grade level (1-4). At the middle/junior high level, we interviewed teachers at grades 5-8. At the high school level, we interviewed a cross-section of school staff. Approximately half (49%) of the teachers interviewed also completed a questionnaire.

Overview of the Findings

We identified findings as being key if they emerged as a prominent feature of the reading/language arts

programs across sites. Most of these findings are characteristics of effective programs and practice. The key findings of this study reinforced expectations for effective reading/language arts programs found in the research literature.

Critical features of successful reading/language arts programs. The evidence from this study indicates that there is no one best way to teach reading and that student engagement in learning is valued above curriculum plans and materials. The results from this study also indicate that classroom teachers (and students) benefit greatly from strong leadership and administrative support as well as from being involved in planning school programs and resource allocations.

Study findings also indicate that in-class, collaborative instructional models that focus on enhancing achievement in the classroom's core curriculum appear to be important for providing high-quality instruction. The emphasis in these classrooms is on creating responsive, in-class support, collaboratively planned and offered by teachers.

One of the key findings that emerged consistently from interviews and teacher questionnaire responses is that exemplary programs provide students with many opportunities to read and write, especially school-day opportunities to read comfortable materials they have chosen and to discuss them with peers. To accomplish this requires greater access to a wider variety of appropriate reading material beyond the basal, such as trade books, newspapers, and magazines. It also requires that time be available every day to engage in reading and writing activities.

Students in the schools in our study also benefited from models, explanations, and demonstrations of the powerful thinking strategies that skilled readers and writers use. Teachers reported that routines such as "think-alouds," public writing and reading, or personalized conferencing after reading or writing played a key role in increasing their students' literacy by actively engaging students in the process of constructing meaning.

While schools could be described as best fitting a specific instructional approach, there is often variation in terms of actual implementation from classroom to classroom. No schools were "pure" examples of any single instructional approach. Children differ, teachers differ, and communities differ, and each of these factors make it impossible to identify a single best way to develop reading and writing ability. What exemplary instruction provides is a balanced instructional effort that takes advantage of the strengths of different approaches to reading/language arts instruction and the recent knowledge of how children learn.

All of the schools in our study have a reading/language arts curriculum framework in place, and the more flexibly it works to accommodate the range of teacher preferences and perspectives, the more effective it appears to be. The tough task is finding the middle ground that offers teachers flexibility and adaptability and offers children some coherence and consistency. In schools where all children become readers and writers, teachers teach effectively and children are offered a rich, coherent instructional program with abundant opportunities to select, read, and discuss wonderful books, stories, myths, poems, and biographies (to name a few).

The flexible use of a basal series plays a role in the balanced reading curriculum of many of the exemplary schools included in this study. No basal series, however, constituted the whole reading/language arts curriculum. Rather, basal readers were viewed as another useful resource for teachers to draw on while planning and delivering instruction.

Program support and factors that influence instruction. The primary work of the school administrator is the improvement of instruction in the classroom. Working to improve reading and writing instruction, specifically, requires expertise in fostering literacy development and substantial skills in fostering collaborative relationships. The trend is away from centralized decision making towards decision-making teams that involve teachers and parents, not just administrators.

The effective reading/language arts programs we studied resulted from much effort, leadership, and support from district or building administrators. Sometimes best support was offered in the form of advice and information. In other cases, it involved accessing resources or evaluating program progress. Administrators of the successful schools included in this study facilitated the collection of information about school programs, advocated resources for the program and for students, and encouraged reflection and collaboration on the part of those involved in reading/language arts instruction. Often administrators reported being called upon to address concerned parents and instill community confidence, usually by inviting parents and community members to get involved the program. In some cases, keeping the community well informed was sufficient to garner support.

Cost of successful reading/language arts programs. None of the schools included in our study reported expenses that would be considered outside of the norm of regular classroom instruction. Regular expenses included those associated with in-class instructional activities as well as remedial, enrichment, and assigned home reading instructional activities. We also attempted to capture estimates of costs associated with instructional preparation activities such as meeting with others to coordinate instruction, producing materials for own class, or obtaining or returning materials from the library. Follow-up activities were also reported, such as scoring tests, grading papers, keeping records, and communicating with students or parents. Some professional development activities that were mentioned included self-study, group classes, observing other classes, and obtaining individual help from others.

We had limited access to information pertaining to personnel time across sites. We were unable to estimate costs at the high school level because reading/language arts instruction at this level is fully integrated with subject matter instruction and, therefore, difficult to estimate.

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Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Critical Features of Successful Reading Programs

Program Structure

We defined critical program features as key qualities and characteristics of best practices in reading/language arts instruction. Included in this definition are program structure, program support, and cost factors.

Program structure includes "materials" and "instructional approaches." Both the teacher questionnaire and the site interview asked teachers about the kinds of materials and instructional approaches used in their classrooms.

Materials. Teachers were asked on the questionnaire whether they used one or more published textbooks or programs for teaching reading/language arts/English, and what percentage of the textbook would be covered. Table 2 shows that across levels most of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire said they would use a textbook. More than three quarters of the elementary teachers said they planned to cover most or all of the textbook. Middle school teachers were divided on the issue of coverage with a quarter saying they would use the text very little (less than 25 percent coverage), a quarter reporting 25 to 49 percent coverage, and a quarter saying they planned to cover most of the text (50 to 74 percent coverage). The majority of secondary school teachers said they would cover one half to three quarters of the text in class with few teachers reporting more or less coverage.

Table 2. Percentage of Teachers Using a Textbook and Extent of Textbook Coverage

Teachers using a textbook	Percentage of Teachers		
	Elementary	Middle	Secondary
	86.7	75.0	85.7
Coverage			
Less than 25%	-	25.0	14.3
25% - 49-%	-	25.0	14.3
50% - 74%	13.3	-	42.9
75% - 90%	6.7	25.0	14.3
More than 90%	80.0	-	-
No response	0	25.0	14.3

*Percentages are based on the 15 elementary, 8 middle, and 7 secondary teachers who responded to this question.

As part of the site interview, teachers were asked to describe the key features of their reading/language arts program and the instructional approach used to teach reading. Regardless of school location or grade level, teachers interviewed reported that it was important for students to have access to interesting and diverse books and other materials essential to successful reading programs. All of the teachers in our study reported using a variety of reading materials beyond the basal, both narrative and expository, that reflect children's interests and provide them with rich literary experiences. They also reported well-stocked classroom and school libraries that included a variety of materials such as newspapers, magazines, trade books, novels, and non-fiction materials.

The elementary school teachers who were interviewed reported using one or more basal series in combination with trade books. Teachers said they used basals selectively, picking and choosing literary selections that complemented thematic units or projects. They emphasized the importance of using authentic reading materials that reflect real-life experiences and expose students to multicultural perspectives. Other materials mentioned include videos, films/filmstrips, computer software, novels, workbooks, and worksheets. Teachers reported occasional, selective use of workbooks and worksheets for skill practice.

Middle school teachers who were interviewed also said they used basals, but tended to rely more on trade books and other types of materials for reading/language arts instruction. The emphasis at this level is on providing students with opportunities to experience a variety of genre in addition to elements of authors' craft. Worksheets are used at this level primarily for vocabulary development. Other materials teachers mentioned using include videos and word processing software.

About half of the secondary school teachers interviewed said they used a literature anthology, but others relied primarily on collections of short stories or novels. Materials frequently mentioned at the secondary level include writing texts and novels, vocabulary books, teacher-created materials, videos, films, and word processing software.

When interviewed about access to computers, most teachers said they had some access through the school computer or resource center or the school library. Few, however, said they had access to the Internet. Only one school mentioned that its district had a major emphasis on technology with districtwide policies on Internet use and software selection. The elementary schools in our sample mentioned more access to computers than either middle or high schools.

Program Implementation. As part of the interview process, teachers were asked to describe the framework or approach to reading/language arts instruction that forms the foundation for their program. A variety of key features were identified by teachers consistently, regardless of school location or grade level:

- Integration of reading and writing
  - Student silent reading daily
    - Teachers model reading
    - Student-led discussions
  - Student selection of reading materials
    - Reading strategy instruction
- Reading and writing across the curriculum
  - Collaborative learning environments

At the elementary level, teachers interviewed were unanimous in their agreement that no single approach is appropriate for teaching reading to every student. Teachers described a balanced approach to beginning reading instruction, using a combination of whole language and phonics. The basic premise underlying these programs is that students need to be emersed in reading, writing, and language daily. When students receive instruction in phonics or skills instruction, it is done in a meaningful context with the emphasis on getting meaning. The main goal of reading instruction, even at the very earliest stages of beginning reading, is comprehension. Other frequently mentioned program elements included student-led, open-ended discussions of issues that allow for a wide range of interpretations and viewpoints; daily journal writing; story and concept maps; vocabulary

acquisition; prior knowledge activation; critical thinking; and the use of metacognitive strategies.

The middle school teachers in our study credited their elementary schools with providing students with a strong foundation in the reading/language arts necessary for success at the middle school level. Interviews of middle school teachers also indicated that many of the same instructional strategies that were used at the elementary level were carried over to instruction at the middle school level. Writing receives heavy emphasis at this level, and writing in response to reading plays a key role in theme-based literature units. Discussion continues to play a major role in instruction at this level, along with daily journal writing, reading across the content areas, and the development of critical thinking skills.

Secondary-level teachers emphasized writing in response to reading and the use of whole, intact texts rather than excerpts. Similar to teachers at the elementary and middle school levels, secondary teachers report integrating reading and writing instruction. Study skills and strategies are emphasized as is daily journal writing. Students are often given choices about reading materials and how they demonstrate their understanding of these materials. Long-term projects and reading and writing across the content areas are also emphasized.

Several questions on the teacher questionnaire attempted to determine the amount of emphasis given various instructional activities or tasks. Teachers were asked to estimate the amount of classroom time they and their students spend engaged in such activities. Table 3 shows teachers' responses to a question asking them to estimate the amount of classroom time spent on various instructional activities during a typical week. Middle/junior high school teachers reported spending one to two hours per week on such activities as working with students in groups/pairs/teams, whole class discussion, and allowing students to work independently. In contrast, the majority of elementary teachers (66.7%) reported spending four hours or more per week in whole class discussion, with nearly half (46.7%) spending large amounts of time on lecturing to the class, working with students in groups/pairs/teams, and having students work independently. Across levels, most teachers reported little or no time on instruction supported by the Internet computer-based instruction. Secondary teachers reported little or no emphasis on most of the activities listed with the exception of lecturing to the class and whole class discussion.

Table 3. Percentage of Teachers Reporting Amount of Instructional Time Spent on Various Activities During a Typical Week

Activity	None-30 Minutes			1-2 hours			4 hours or more<		
	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	Elementary	Middle	Secondary
Lecturing to class	33.4	12.5	28.6	20.0	87.5	71.4	46.7	-	-
Giving oral recitation/ drill	46.7	37.5	100	40.0	62.5	-	6.7	-	-
Whole class discussion	-	12.5	-	33.3	75.0	100	66.7	12.5	-
Students in pairs/groups/teams	-	25.0	71.4	53.3	62.5	28.6	46.7	12.5	-
Students working independently	-	25.0	71.4	53.3	50.0	28.6	46.7	12.5	-
Demonstration	13.3	37.5	85.7	60.0	25.0	14.3	6.7	-	-
Computer-based instruction	46.7	37.5	85.7	40.0	37.5	14.3	13.3	-	-
Internet supported instruction	86.6	74.5	100.0	-	-	-	-	-	-

*Percentages are based on 15 elementary, 9 middle, and 7 secondary teachers who responded to the questionnaire.

In a related question, teachers were asked to estimate the amount of time students are engaged in various types of learning activities (Table 4). Elementary teachers were more likely to report students spending 4 or more hours on various activities than either middle or secondary teachers. Elementary teachers reported their students spent 4 or more hours per week listening and taking notes and engaged in discussion. More than half (53.4%) of the teachers questioned said their students spent 1 to 2 hours completing exercises/tests, writing a report/paper, and doing research.

In contrast, the majority of middle school teachers reported that their students spent 30 minutes or less per week doing research or giving presentations. High percentages of teachers reported having students spend 1 to 2 hours per week listening/taking notes and engaging in discussion. Other activities that students spend 1 to 2 hours per week on include completing exercises/tests and writing a report/paper. Only 13 percent of the teachers reported that students spend 4 or more hours on a single activity (engaging in discussion).

Most of the secondary-level teachers estimated that students spend 30 minutes or less per week writing a report, doing research, giving presentations, or using computers. They also reported that students spend 1 to 2 hours per week listening/taking notes, engaging in discussions, and completing exercises/tests.

Table 4. Amount of Time Students Spend on Classroom Activities in a Typical Week

	None-30 min.			1-2 Hours			4 or More Hours		
	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	Elementary	Middle	Secondary
Listening/ taking notes	26.7	25.0	28.6	20.0	75.0	57.2	46.6	-	14.3
Engaged in discussion	-	-	-	26.7	87.5	71.4	73.4	12.5	28.6
Completing Exercises/tests	13.3	37.5	71.5	53.4	62.5	42.9	33.4	-	-
Writing a report/paper	26.7	37.5	71.5	53.4	62.5	28.6	20.0	-	-
Doing research	33.3	87.5	85.7	53.4	12.5	14.3	6.7	-	-
Giving presentations	53.3	62.5	85.8	46.7	12.5	-	-	-	-
Using computers	33.3	50.0	85.7	53.3	37.5	14.3	13.3	-	-

*Percentages are based on the 15 elementary, 9 middle, and 7 secondary teachers who responded to the questionnaire.

Teachers were also asked how often they engaged students in various activities related to instruction. Table 5 shows that all of the middle school teachers and the majority of elementary- and secondary-level teachers reported that students rarely took field trips. Activities reported as occurring frequently include watching films, filmstrips, or videos at the elementary level and reading supplementary materials at the middle and elementary levels. The majority of secondary teachers reported watching films and reading supplementary materials occasionally.

Table 5. Student Time Engaged in Activities Related to Instruction

Activity	Frequently (every day or almost daily)			Occasionally (1-4 times per month)			Rarely (almost never or never)		
	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	Elementary	Middle	Secondary
Take field trips	-	-	-	33.3	-	14.3	66.7	100	85.8
Watch films, filmstrips, videos	80.0	-	-	-	50.0	71.4	20.0	50.0	28.6
Read supplementary materials	53.4	75.0	28.6	46.7	12.5	57.2	-	-	14.3

* Percentages are based on the 15 elementary, 8 middle, and 7 secondary teachers who responded to this question.

Part II of the teacher questionnaire focused on the amount of time or emphasis given to teaching specific reading/language arts skills and strategies. Table 6 shows a summary of the percentage of teachers responding to major skill and strategy categories listed below (see Appendix D for the complete breakdown by individual skill or strategy).

- **General skills and strategies of the reading process** (e.g., asking questions, using a glossary or dictionary, making predictions based on text, decoding using context, adjusting reading speed)
- **General skills and strategies for reading literature** (e.g., main and subordinate characters, elements of plot, use of literary devices, personal response to text, internal/external conflicts)
- **General skills and strategies for reading information** (e.g., inferring main ideas, author's purpose, author's point of view, text structures, purposes for reading, implied generalizations)
- **Using different information sources to accomplish specific tasks** (e.g., following directions or procedures, reading schedules and diagrams, interpreting information in a data matrix, understanding political cartoons)
- **General skills and strategies of the writing process** (e.g., writing stories or essays, revising content, writing for different audiences, demonstrating clear personal style and sense of cohesion)
- **Stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing** (e.g., use of transitional devices, variety of sentence structures, effective use of technical terms, variety of vocabulary, use of descriptive language)
- **Grammatical and mechanical conventions** (e.g., use of complete sentences, correct spelling, appropriate capitalization and punctuation, proper use of coordinating conjunctions)

As shown in Table 6, more than half of the elementary teachers responding to Part II of the questionnaire said they spend 20 or more hours per year teaching grammar and mechanics. Approximately one-third of the middle and secondary teachers said they placed heavy emphasis on teaching skills and strategies of the writing process (35.5% and 33.4%, respectively).

The majority of elementary and middle teachers reported placing moderate emphasis on general reading skills and strategies and skills and strategies for reading literature. Approximately half (46.3%) of middle school teachers also said they placed a moderate amount of emphasis on stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Table 6. Summary of Percentage of Teachers Reporting Different Amounts of Emphasis for Reading/Language Arts Skill and Strategy Instruction

Skill/Strategy	Heavy Emphasis (20+ hours)			Moderate Emphasis (4 - 20 hours)			Little Emphasis (4 hours or less)		
	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	Elementary	Middle	Secondary	Elementary	Middle	Secondary
General skills & strategies of the reading process	20.0	16.4	19.0	42.0	36.5	20.4	38.0	47.1	60.6
General skills & strategies for reading literature	29.1	31.2	14.8	41.0	39.2	41.9	30.0	29.5	43.3
General skills & strategies for reading information	29.1	26.0	7.0	37.3	33.2	48.0	42.0	40.8	37.4
Using different info. sources to accomplish specific tasks	10.9	12.9	*	22.4	9.5	14.3	66.8	77.6	14.3
General skills & strategies of the writing process	23.8	35.5	33.4	34.9	31.3	42.4	41.4	33.2	24.2
Stylistic & rhetorical aspects of writing	28.5	16.9	26.2	31.2	46.3	40.0	40.4	36.8	33.8
Grammatical & mechanical conventions	52.3	26.0	24.4	21.1	36.5	17.0	26.6	37.5	58.6

*Percentages are based on 15 elementary, 9 middle, and 7 secondary teachers who responded to Part II the questionnaire.
*Denotes missing data.

Individual skills and strategies at the elementary level on which teachers reported placing moderate to heavy emphasis include:

General skills and strategies of the reading process

- Decoding unknown words using context clues (47%)
- Adjusting reading speed to suit purpose (60%)
- Determining the purpose of persuasive text (50%)
- Decoding words using phonetic and structural analysis (53%)
- Reflecting on learning after reading (60%)
- Persuasive devices (58%)
- Specific strategies for clearing up text confusions (50%)

General skills and strategies for reading literature

- Relationship of events and characters to real life (47%)
- Dialogues in stories (50%)
- Elements of plot (47%)
- Personal response to text (47%)
- Abstract connections between stories and one's life (46%)

General skills and strategies for reading information

- Recognizing main ideas (54%)
- Recognizing author's point of view (54%)
- Reading for different purposes (50%)
- Using information as new knowledge (53%)

General skills and strategies of the writing process

- Writing stories or essays (53%)
- Writing expository pieces (50%)
- Writing autobiography and narrative pieces (50%)

Grammatical and mechanical conventions

- Writing in complete sentences (73%)
- Proper use of nouns (53%)
- Use of appropriate punctuation and capitalization (73%)

Individual skills and strategies receiving moderate to heavy emphasis at the middle school level include:

General skills and strategies of the reading process

- Making predictions based on text (56%)
- Representing concrete information as explicit mental pictures (50%)
- Recognizing specific devices used for persuasion (63%)
- Understanding texts from the perspective from which they were written (63%)

General skills and strategies for reading literature

- Using literature to understand better the actions of others (56%)
- Understanding dialogues as they relate to stories (63%)

- Understanding internal/external conflicts between main and subordinate characters (63%)

General skills and strategies for reading information

- Understanding text structures (63%)
- Implied generalizations (63%)
- Basic linear paths in organizational charts (50%)

General skills and strategies of the writing process

- Seeking help from others to improve writing (50%)
- Writing stories or essays appropriate for audiences (50%)
- Writing expository pieces (50%)
- Writing essays that include cause and effect (50%)
- Writing narrative pieces (57%)
- Revising one's own writing (50%)
- Drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading written work (75%)
- Writing for different purposes (63%)
- Writing descriptive essays (50%)
- Demonstrating a clear personal style and voice in writing (71%)

Stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

- Using explicit transitional devices (56%)
- Using a variety of sentence lengths and structures (63%)
- Using stimulating vocabulary (75%)

Grammatical and mechanical conventions

- Proper use of adverbial forms (50%)
- Appropriate capitalization (75%)
- Effective use of technical terms and notations in writing (50%)

Secondary teachers reported giving moderate to heavy emphasis to the following specific skills and strategies:

General skills and strategies of the reading process

- Determining the purpose of persuasive text (60%)
- Reflecting on learning after reading (57%)

General skills and strategies for reading literature

- Sharing responses to literature with peers (86%)
- Making inferences regarding character motivation (57%)
- Elements of plot (57%)

General skills and strategies for reading information

- Recognizing main ideas (60%)
- Understanding text structures (100%)
- Recognizing commonly used technical terms in informational texts (50%)
- Varying purposes for reading (60%)
- Understanding implied generalizations (60%)

- Using new information as knowledge (60%)
- Understanding information-organizing strategies (60%)
- Understanding how peer discussions promote understanding information (50%)

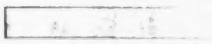
Using different information sources to accomplish specific tasks

- Following directions for procedures (50%)
- Understand the political and social messages of cartoons (50%)

General skills and strategies of the writing process

- Writing stories or essays based on personal experiences (67%)
- Seeking help from others to improve writing (57%)
- Writing stories or essays appropriate for a particular audience (80%)
- Writing expository pieces (57%)
- Writing persuasive pieces (60%)
- Writing expressive pieces (60%)
- Revising content of one's own writing (57%)
- Drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading written work (60%)
- Writing for different purposes (60%)

As part of the interview process, we asked teachers about grouping for reading instruction. Many of the teachers with whom we spoke said they had either eliminated ability-based reading groups already or planned to do so in the very near future. This decision was based primarily on their observations that the most effective way to promote effective reading instruction is by eliminating the stigma associated with ability groups. Teachers said they read and write with the entire class and have students work on literacy tasks individually or in small groups with changing membership.



Program Support

Program support includes staff development and planning. Both the teacher questionnaire and the site interview asked teachers about opportunities for professional development.

Staff Development. Both the interview and questionnaire provided information about professional development opportunities as well as formal and informal opportunities to plan related to reading/language arts instruction.

Teachers who responded to the questionnaire were asked to report the number of half-days spent in formal inservice programs directly related to improving reading/language arts curriculum and instruction. Nearly half the teachers (47%) said they spent 4 days or less on formal inservice programs. The remaining 53% of the teachers reported spending between 5 and 10 days on formal inservice activities.

In a related question, teachers were asked about the types of support received for participating in formal inservice programs that were non-reading/language arts-related as well as reading/language arts-related. In general, teachers reported receiving more support for participating in reading-related formal inservice programs than non-reading-related programs (Table 7).

Information obtained from the interview about professional development opportunities indicated that most school districts offer optional workshops for staff development throughout the school year. Teachers also reported high levels of support for attending reading/language arts conferences.

Table 7. Support for Professional Development Opportunities

Type of Support	Non-reading/language Arts	Reading/language Arts
Released time from teaching	10.0	16.7
Travel and/or/per diem expenses	23.3	73.3
Stipends	20.0	26.7
Professional Growth	30.3	30.3

* Teachers were instructed to circle all that apply. Percentages are based on the 30 teachers who responded to this question.

Planning for instruction. Teachers were also asked to estimate the amount of time spent since the beginning of the school year meeting informally with other teachers on lesson planning, curriculum development, or other instructional matters.

Nearly half the teachers (46.7%) questioned reported spending at least 1 hour but less than 5 hours in informal planning. More than a quarter of the teachers (26.7%) said they spent between 5 and 9 hours per month meeting informally. The remaining teachers reported spending either less than 1 hour (13.3%) or more than 10 hours (13.3%) engaged in informal planning activities.

Information obtained from the interviews with teachers about planning time indicated that the amount of time set aside for formal planning varied, ranging anywhere from 12 to over 200 hours per year. Many of the teachers interviewed reported using some personal time to complete planning tasks on their own or with colleagues. In general, teachers felt that they would benefit from having additional time for formal planning activities.

Factors That Influence Instruction

Teachers were asked about a variety of factors that have an impact on reading/language arts instruction at both the school and classroom level (Table 8). Nearly all of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire identified the following factors as having a significant impact on instruction at both the school and classroom levels:

- Teacher's belief in the importance of reading/language arts when compared to other subjects
- Student reading abilities
- Teacher interest in reading/language arts
- Teacher preparation to teach reading/language arts
- Number of textbooks
- Student interest in reading/language arts

A high percentage of teachers also felt that time to teach reading/language arts, student discipline, and professional development are also important factors. Other factors, such as professional development support from textbook publishers and IRA/NCTE standards, were identified by 40 percent or less teachers as having an impact on instruction.

Table 8. Factors that Influence Instruction at School and Classroom Levels

Influences	Percentage of Teachers Reporting a Positive Influence	
	School	Classroom
Belief in importance of reading/language arts when compared to other subjects	93.3	100.0
Facilities	73.3	73.3
Funds for purchasing equipment and supplies	76.7	83.3
Materials for individualizing instruction	76.7	66.7
Number of textbooks	93.3	86.7
Quality of textbooks	90.0	93.3
Access to computers	63.3	76.7
Student interest in reading/language arts	90.0	90.0
Student reading abilities	96.7	93.3
Teacher interest in reading/language arts	90.0	96.7
Teacher preparation to teach reading/language arts	90.0	93.3
Student attendance	73.3	70.0
Student mobility	56.7	40.0
Teacher planning time	73.3	86.7
Time to teach reading/language arts	80.0	86.7
Class sizes	70.0	70.0
Student discipline	80.0	70.0
Articulation of instruction across grade levels	76.7	30.0
Professional development	80.0	80.0
Diversity of language arts electives	26.7	23.3
Enrollment in language courses	40.0	36.7
Graduation requirements	43.3	36.7
Counselors	23.3	23.3
State curriculum policies	50.0	46.7
District curriculum and testing policies	73.3	70.0
IRA/NCTE standards	36.7	43.3
School administration	63.3	70.0
District administration	60.0	50.0
Professional/technical support from textbook publisher	40.0	40.0

*Percentages are based on the 30 teachers who responded to this question.

Teachers were also asked to identify problems that exist at the school and classroom levels (Table 9). None of the teachers reported having any serious or even moderately serious problems at either level. Minor problems at both the school and classroom level include tardiness and absenteeism. At the school level, student mobility and physical conflicts among students were also identified as minor problems.

Table 9. Minor Problem Areas at the School and Classroom Levels

Problem Areas	Percentage of Teachers Reporting Minor Problem	
	School	Classroom
Tardiness	56.7	46.7
Absenteeism	56.7	46.7
Student mobility	43.3	26.7
Class cutting	30.0	6.7
Physical conflicts	46.7	10.0
Gang activities	6.7	0
Robbery or theft	26.7	3.3
Vandalism	36.7	10.0
Use of alcohol	23.3	10.0
Use of other drugs	26.7	10.0

* Percentages are based on the 15 elementary, 8 middle, and 7 secondary teachers who responded to this question

The questionnaire also asked teachers about the extent to which certain factors influence the assignment of students to classes. Table 10 shows the percentages of teachers at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels who identified specific factors as having a major influence on class assignment. Teacher recommendations are more often reported to be a major factor at the elementary and middle school levels than at the secondary level. In contrast, parent's choice was identified as a major factor at the secondary level, with student's choice and previous reading/language arts experiences and grades also playing a major role in student assignment to classes at the secondary level.

Table 10. Percentage of Teachers Reporting Factors Influencing Student Assignment to Classes by Type of School

Factors	Type of School		
	Elementary	Middle	Secondary
Teacher recommendations	60.0	62.5	42.9
Previous reading/language arts experiences and grades	33.3	25.0	71.4
Student's choice	0	0	71.4
Parent's choice	26.7	50.0	100.0

* Percentages are based on the 15 elementary, 8 middle, and 7 secondary teachers who responded to this question

As part of the interview, teachers and school administrators were asked about the role played by parental and community support in the success of their reading/language arts programs. All who were interviewed reported

high levels of parental involvement in many areas of their reading/language arts programs, from participating in the selection of instructional materials to fund raising through school-sponsored events. Other activities mentioned include encouraging families to read together at home for at least 15 minutes each night; parent/teacher conferences during the school year when parents can spend time with teachers individually and see samples of student work; and parent surveys to obtain their input concerning their level of satisfaction with the school program.

Many schools also depend on the community for donations of equipment and materials as well as opportunities for career exploration. Several schools we visited reported community support for writing and distributing school newspapers and newsletters as well as providing volunteers to help with school projects.

Teachers and administrators interviewed said they gauge how well they are doing by looking at levels of parental involvement and satisfaction and community support. Both parents and community were cited by study participants as having a major impact on the success of school programs.

The Cost of Successful Reading/Language Arts Programs

Information about the cost of implementing an exemplary reading/language arts program was gathered as part of the process of collecting information about the specific characteristics of reading programs. Interview/survey questions were designed to provide information about the following program activities essential to determining cost:

- *In-class instructional activities* as well as remedial, enrichment, and assigned home reading instructional activities
- *Instructional preparation activities* associated with planning including meeting with others to coordinate instruction, producing materials for own class, and obtaining or returning materials from the library.
- *Follow-up activities,* such as scoring tests, grading papers, keeping records, and communicating with students or parents
- *Professional development activities* such as self-study, group classes, observing other classes, and obtaining individual help from others.
- *Program development or creating activities* involving committee meetings, writing new program, developing tests to be used by other teachers, publishing writings, and obtaining funding for reading programs or resources.

Determining costs involved describing the types and amount of resources used in each part or function of the program, including:

Personnel time. Teachers were asked to "estimate" the number of hours involved in frequent activities in a "typical" week during the school year. For less-frequent activities, teachers were asked to estimate the number of hours involved over a typical school month or for the entire calendar year, including summer activities. We focused specifically on teachers' time, both in and outside of class.

Materials and equipment. This category included trade books; commercially prepared instructional materials; number of pages duplicated by teacher or district for handouts or overheads; wall charts; displays (number or extent of materials/time used); use of video, computers, other supplies (paper, pencils, audiotapes, drawing supplies)

Other expenses or resources. We considered tuition for training or fees for services (e.g., audiologist screening), donated or loaned resources, travel (personal miles, number of trips for class--local or distant sites), conference participation (e.g., reading clubs going to state meetings), rewards or parties (e.g., ice cream social for all students who read 100 books)

We also attempted to catalog basic categories of funding for various program functions: whether funds were allocated within the regular school budget, use of Title I funds (federal and state), private grants, or teachers' personal expenditures.

Due to the short time available for gathering this information and the level of detail requested, we were unable to obtain pertinent cost information from a number of the schools in our study. In particular, we were unable to obtain consistent estimates of time spent specifically on reading/language arts at the high school level because it tends to be fully integrated with other subject matter instruction. Therefore, what follows is a discussion of the range of estimates obtained for costs associated with major expenditures (i.e., materials and equipment, personnel time, and related resources) at the elementary and middle/junior high levels.

Personnel Time. Personnel costs for instruction and planning time were calculated based on an average teacher salary of $30,000. Costs associated with library time and computer resource center time were calculated based on an average staff salary of $26,000. Costs associated with classroom aides were based on an annual staff salary of $14,000. Time calculations were based on 30 weeks per year of instruction.

As might be expected, somewhat higher costs are associated with reading/language arts programs at the elementary level where instruction tends to be somewhat more focused on reading instruction than at the middle school level (Table 11). In an average class of 23 students, the per pupil cost for personnel time is approximately $293 per student per week. At the middle school level, the average per pupil cost per week is approximately $195 (without classroom aides).

Table 11. Personnel Costs Associated With Reading/Language Arts Instructional Time

Cost Factor	Elementary Level	Middle/Junior Level
	Minutes Per Week/Cost	Minutes Per Week/Cost
Language Arts Instruction	825 min./$3,440.25	800 min./$3,336.00
Library Time	45 min./$168.75	45 min./$168.75
Computer/Resource Center	77 min./$288.75	30 min./$112.50
Classroom Aides	180 min./$349.20	*
Planning	600 min./$2,502.00	300 min./$1,251.00

*Information not available.

Materials and Other Related Costs. Estimates of cost for materials varied greatly by school and by district. No estimates were available for teacher-created materials, although planning time includes creation of materials. The cost of published materials at both the elementary and middle school levels was estimated to be approximately $100 per student. Teachers reported spending anywhere from $100 to $1,000 per year out of their own pockets on materials for the classroom. Other material costs mentioned include approximately $30 per year for photocopying and $300 per classroom for consumable workbooks. Professional development costs were generally $1,500 per

teacher per year. Funding sources mentioned included the school district regular budget, state reading improvement grants, PTA gifts to school and teachers, book fairs (class or school fund-raising activities), and Title I money.

Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Three Profiles of Exemplary Reading Instruction

This section provides a slightly more in-depth view of best practices at the elementary, middle, and secondary school levels. Schools included in this profile section demonstrate a number of strengths relating to program structure and support.

Profile of an Exemplary Elementary School

This school is structured for a high level of social interaction during the school day as it is a "school without walls." Special education students have a more traditional classroom with a more closed atmosphere to help them concentrate better.

The reading/language arts program at this school is literature based. Direct instruction is emphasized, based on interdisciplinary thematic units that combine reading, writing, social studies, and science. This school plans to move toward a stronger phonics approach based on the need observed by teachers for students to have more intense instruction in this area. Skills instruction is embedded in a meaningful context. Materials include basal selections, workbooks, and books from the classroom and school library. An important component of this program is having students become familiar with different text structures including narratives, poems, magazine articles, photo essays, interviews, and science experiments.

Areas of strength include:

Assessment. Teachers use a variety of assessment methods including portfolios of student work, self-assessments, peer assessments, and teacher assessment instruments and methods.

Approach to reading process. Teachers used a rich variety of after-reading elaboration techniques such as writing their own picture storybooks integrating themes read about, and hands-on acting out of stories using puppets. At the primary level, teachers provided students with story starters to help them scaffold their writing. A time is set aside every day for individual reading.

Social, collaborative activities. Students have a variety of opportunities to engage in team projects, group writing, group discussions, and generating their own books.

Teachers model reading process. Teachers model the reading processes for students. They use story starters as a way of modeling after-reading processes. For example, primary-level students might start with dictation in September, move to the story starter by December, and then write more elaborate responses to the story starters in March.

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Integrating reading and writing. Teachers allow students to do follow-up writing which takes off on a theme, but allows enough room for the learner to bring in his or her contextual knowledge. Also, some of the teachers report using creative writing and creative acting with puppets to draw on meaningful contexts of student ideas. Fifth-grade students write an autobiography and use the computer to generate a profile with color graphics. Students also watch the University of Pennsylvania's weekly 20-minute broadcast program, "What's in the News," for current events. Viewing of the broadcast is followed by discussion and writing activities.

Profile of an Exemplary Middle School

Instruction at this school is characterized as engaging both the teacher and children as "builders, fixers, doers, and makers." Information never goes one way and is never without a clearly defined purpose. The teacher never presents facts for the sake of presenting facts. At the center of teaching and learning is a problem or question that is interesting to all participants and involves both actions and interactions.

Teachers are encouraged to use a thematic approach to integrate subjects, to present lessons that match a variety of learning styles, and to develop tiered assignments to meet the needs of students with varying abilities. Each teacher is provided an annual budget to purchase additional supplementary materials and to support his or her own professional decisions toward teaching reading/language arts as well as other subjects.

Teachers are also challenged to design their instruction and assignments to meet the needs of the at-risk students in their classrooms. Teachers needing additional support when working with a student who is struggling may request a meeting with the CARES Team. This student support team consists of the principal, two classroom teachers, one special education teacher, the school psychologist, the social worker, the positive life skills teacher, and others as necessary. This group reviews the interventions the teacher has already tried and brainstorms other strategies to assist the teacher in working with the at-risk student. An accommodation plan is developed that includes a monitoring plan and a follow-up meeting.

Program strengths include the following:

Staff Development. This school has an extensive staff development program available for teachers in the reading/language arts area. A number of workshops are offered throughout the year by teachers in the district who have expertise in a particular area, such as literature circles, and in integrated spelling and writing across the curriculum. Teachers are also encouraged to take advantage of graduate courses in reading.

Program Evaluation. This school uses state and national achievement tests, and surveys parents and teachers annually as to their perceptions of how students are achieving. A School Improvement Committee compiles and analyzes results of the tests and survey and makes recommendations for goals for improvement for the next school year. Also, a district study committee for reading/language arts made up of teachers from every elementary school in the district reviews schoolwide data, studies new materials, revises the district curriculum, and makes recommendations for local performance assessment tools.

Parental Involvement. Parents have input through conferences with their children's teachers on an individual basis. School newsletters, the state school report card, achievement test results, report cards, progress reports, and parent guides to "What Your Child Should Learn" are published and distributed periodically throughout the year. Three parents from each school are on the Advisory Committee for the Board of Education. This group work on three to five research projects for the board annually. In addition, they have monthly meetings where they receive information about school operations, curriculum, and so on, and are invited to ask questions of any board member or administrator on any school-related topic.

Student-Selected Materials. As part of the literature circle, students are given opportunities to choose which books they want to read after hearing a summary prepared by the teacher. Students alternate between work days and discussion days, allowing students to share with each other what they have been reading. Students often lead discussion groups that are formed based on literature selections rather than ability.

Balanced Approach to Writing. Students are given 30 to 40 minutes to write each day with minimal distractions. They focus on various types of writing. Students have opportunities to peer edit in a quiet corner or they can have their papers edited by their teacher during a conference they set up the day before the meeting. Students engage in a balance of informal writing, such as journals in subjects areas, literature responses, and writer workshops; process writing that includes spelling, different forms of poetry, or writing a descriptive paragraph. All writing is shared with a variety of audiences: important people in students' lives or their classmates.

Student Ownership. Students are given a choice about which books will be read aloud. Discussions are open-ended and students are taught how to question the teacher, the materials, and peers to allow for the widest range of interpretations possible. Students keep journals of responses to their readings and reflect on what they have read. Students are taught a variety of ways to organize their thoughts through story maps, story chains, and cause and effect diagrams.

Profile of an Exemplary High School

Parental involvement runs high at this high school. For example, parents plan and administer an annual Job Shadowing Day off site for students. Parents also sponsor an annual on-site Career Day for students. They arrange both days through networking with community business leaders and professionals to provide students with an opportunity to investigate careers of their choice.

The English program at this exemplary site is focused on preparing students for college. A very high percentage of seniors go to college (about 86 percent for the 1996 graduating class). This program goal is met through strong academic curriculum and social discipline supported by teachers and administration, and reinforced at home by parents. The academic emphasis is on the development of effective argumentation skills and the ability to write, conduct research, and read a variety of materials.

The curriculum at this high school is teacher developed. The faculty reported giving comprehensive semester-end finals across the curriculum. At this high school, students are involved in many aspects of school life. For example, they inform curriculum decision making through the curriculum modification process.

The English Department at this high school uses a cooperative team approach. Faculty are involved in the school's open-ended after-school tutoring program to which teachers refer students. The English faculty reports feeling highly respected among parents and the community for establishing and upholding high standards for student performance. The English/language arts program is implemented consistently across grade levels through the strong, collaborative efforts of the faculty.

According to the assistant principal, about 84 percent of parents attend school nights. The culture of the community places a high value on education. Parents are very involved in their children's education. They feel free to discuss concerns with teachers and tend to be very supportive. Parents support and encourage disciplinary actions taken at school and reinforce those actions at home.

Areas identified as program strong points include:

Parent Involvement. Parents voluntarily conduct their own informal evaluation via two schoolwide open houses per year: fall and parent/teacher conferences. High levels of parental

involvement is a tradition at this school. "Historically it's been a small community school," says the principal--a trait he and the teachers attribute to the success of the program and their high standards.

Assessment. Assessment methods include self-assessments, peer assessments, and teacher assessment instruments and methods. For example, one teacher reported using a peer assessment strategy in which students write questions for their peers on various topics or issues, setting up a friendly competition among peer groups. At the ninth-grade level, teachers report tracking students' comprehension of readings through the use of ongoing multiple quizzes and follow-up discussion to address gaps in comprehension. Twelfth-grade teachers rigorously test for reading comprehension at the unit level.

Teamwork. Teachers are dedicated to student learning and strong teamwork. Teachers reported spending a great deal of personal time on individualized instruction and feedback to students.

Reading Process. This process includes comparing texts, authors, and perspectives; and making transitions into the kinds of higher-order thinking skills necessary for successfully completing the extensive reading and writing assignments typically required in upper-level courses. The critical thinking process and document analysis is used to evaluate and interpret texts.

Social, collaborative activities. Students are assigned various types of assignments including writing in a group, engaging in group discussions and debates about texts, and generating peer quizzes.

Teachers modeling reading processes. At this high school, teachers value modeling the reading processes through discussions, peer interactions, and peer developed quizzes, peer presentations and evaluations of same. Teachers also ask experts in the community to share their knowledge and understanding of things read about. The school has a "discourse community" approach to reading and writing.

Program Evaluation/Accountability Measures. This high school has a comprehensive, ongoing program evaluation involving all stakeholders, including a Curriculum Modification Process Form that the principal says "encourages a constant review and evaluation of curriculum." The five-step process he describes empowers all stakeholders--i.e,. students, parents, teachers, school board--to influence curriculum. An annual informal student survey is conducted with recent graduates to find out how well they think they were prepared for their first semester in college. Event outcomes serve as a barometer for the administration of how well the school is doing. IGAP and ACT test scores are closely monitored by the administrators, parents, and teachers. Administration observes teachers in the classroom twice a semester, followed by four formal evaluations/discussions with teachers to determine if district goals/objectives are followed. A year-end review is also conducted.

Planning Time. Quarterly formal department meetings are held before school. Informal daily meetings among faculty members allow for comprehensive program coordination. Teachers are expected by parents to uphold high academic standards, and strive to meet parental expectations.

NCREL North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Conclusions and Recommendations

Pathways Home

Conclusions

The teachers and administrators who participated in this study implemented exemplary reading/language arts programs with specific goals in mind:

- To help all students read and write fluently and with understanding
- To integrate reading/language arts with subject area instruction
- To teach children in their own classrooms without subgrouping based on ability
- To increase parent and community involvement in the literacy program

This study examined 10 schools whose students were consistently high achievers in reading/language arts. Every classroom, every teacher, every program was unique in some respects, yet there were a number of common features of instruction across study sites that teachers and administrators felt played an important role in the success of their reading/ language arts programs. These features included:

A Balanced Approach to Reading

The teachers in this study share many of the same assumptions about learning and effective reading/language arts instruction. First, they all shared the belief that children come to school with valuable knowledge upon which teachers can build. Second, they respect the backgrounds, language, interests and abilities of the children they teach. Third, they also believe that the focus of instruction should be the entire processes of reading and writing rather than the subskills. Fourth, they all felt strongly that children learn from each other through collaborative experiences. Fifth, they were unanimous in their support for explicit instruction of strategies or skills in a meaningful context. For many children, this kind of instruction is absolutely essential for them to become effective readers and writers.

High Teacher Expectations and Motivated Learners

Students who succeed have teachers who expect them to succeed. At every level in every classroom, the teachers who participated in this study said they focused on students' strengths and weaknesses with appropriate instruction. Teaching and assessing a variety of skills and capabilities also emerged as important characteristics of effective instruction, so that success or failure does not depend upon a few things that only a few students do well. Effective teachers try to find the best instruction by being flexible in their approach to reading/language arts instruction, knowing when

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students need additional help, organizing cooperative work groups, and meeting with parents to discuss how they can support learning at home. At the same time, teachers and administrators must work in concert to ensure that the necessary resources are available.

When students are interested in what they do, when they understand why a task is worthy of effort, they are capable of significant accomplishments. Students tend to be motivated by and rise to the highest expectations.

Learning is Organized

Effective reading/language arts instruction is organized around meaningful events that lead to achievement of objectives. Teachers must have the freedom to modify the curriculum when it is appropriate to do so. They are able to see each lesson from their students' point of view. The teacher's job is much more than delivering the curriculum. Through appropriate assessment, the teacher monitors learning, making adjustments along the way to facilitate learning or motivate students. Teachers who know the goals of the program, and understand the reading process and the purpose of the materials they use, are more likely to organize instruction effectively.

Focus on Meaning

Asked what they have learned, students are likely to come up with different, sometimes contradictory accounts. Whether students are putting together their personal interpretations of a poem or following directions to perform an experiment, finding out what meaning each student has managed to construct is an essential part of teaching students to read and write.

Time for Reading and Writing

Our research on effective programs shows that time is a crucial variable in effective reading/language arts instruction. There's only so much time available in the school day. Schools allocate time in the form of a schedule, and within that framework, teachers further allocate time to classroom activities. Some of these activities involve students in learning, but some, like taking attendance or record keeping, do not. In elementary schools, teachers sometimes borrow time from one subject to give to another subject and, depending on a teacher's ability to maintain a balance, the practice might result in a huge deficit in one subject area. Time from instruction is also lost to special assemblies, field trips, and other crises that force the cancellation of classes.

At our study sites, the schools' schedules are platforms of priorities. Reading/ language arts instruction was a goal of the highest priority, which was protected through vigilance and supervision.

Assessment to Inform Instruction

Assessment emerged as a necessary feature of effective instruction at the schools in our study. We saw examples of many different types of assessment, both formative and summative, used by teachers. Its primary value resides in the fact that assessment was used to assess achievement of the full range of objectives set for the class. Teachers in our study felt that assessment really helps to cement the relationship between student and teacher. Rather than feel punished for weaknesses, the discovery of a weakness leads to new learning.

Discussions That Promote Learning

Teachers told us that the type of discussions they like to promote are those where there is a specific topic or theme, all students are participating, remarks are relevant to the topic, opinions are offered with evidence, students are listening and talking to one another, and teachers are acting as guides and facilitators. Advantages to discussion include teaching students to communicate their opinions persuasively, listen to other opinions, collaborate with others, and sort out subordinate and coordinate relationships between ideas. Students learn how other students think. To make meaning out of discussions requires organizing information into coherent summaries. Students rarely emerge

from discussions having all learned the same thing.

Engaging in Collaborative Learning

The teachers in our study reported that learning to collaborate is excellent preparation for the world of work. Teachers felt that certain learning tasks were better done collaboratively than alone. Not all tasks were assigned to groups. Teachers who adopted this method, however, continued to value individual work or peer competition. To use collaborative learning effectively, teachers entered into collaboration with students.

Involving Parents and Community

Schoolwide celebrations of literacy to which parents and the community are invited as guests or contributors were commonplace at many of the sites in our study. One school promotes a parent-sponsored job-shadowing day off campus for students and a career day on campus. Teachers invite experts, such as firefighters and police officers, into their classrooms to provide hands-on experiences related to reading and writing instruction. At other schools, teachers encourage parental involvement by sending books home with students that families can read together. Newsletters are another effective way of communicating with parents about the school reading/language arts program. In many classrooms, parent aides play an important role in the success of the reading and writing program.

Guidelines for Implementing Exemplary Reading Programs

This study serves to confirm what research indicates are the qualities and characteristics of best practices in reading/language arts instruction. Landmark documents such as *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (1986), *New Policy Guidelines for Reading: Connecting Research and Practice* (1989), and *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* (1993), validate the instructional model that the teachers in our study have moved towards. The following guidelines are not intended to be a rigid set of rules or requirements for exemplary reading programs. In fact, not every exemplary program in our study demonstrated every practice listed in the guidelines. We also acknowledge the fact that schools not included in our study have developed exemplary practices not mentioned here.

The following guidelines are organized by the three areas of our study: program structure, program support, and cost.

Program Structure:

1. Beginning reading instruction focuses on providing students with many opportunities to interact with print, both at school and at home.
2. Reading aloud is an important part of beginning to learn to read.
3. Students at all grade levels are exposed to a wide variety of materials that go well beyond the basal reader.
4. Students have opportunities to choose reading materials.
5. Teachers model good reading behavior.
6. Reading skills and strategies are taught in a meaningful context.
7. Reading and writing are integrated with content area instruction at all grade levels.

8. Discussion plays an important role in reading and writing activities.
9. Reading and writing are integrated.
10. Assessments align with the goals of instruction.
11. Students have many opportunities to write.
12. Teachers demonstrate a balanced approach to instruction, including phonics and whole language.
13. Students have opportunities to learn in a collaborative environment.
14. Both students and teachers hold high expectations for success.

Program Support:

1. Teachers are supported to be decision-makers.
2. Administrators support teachers as learners through professional development opportunities.
3. Sufficient time is allocated for both formal and informal planning for instruction.
4. Parents play an important role in the reading/language arts program.
5. Teachers and students benefit from community support.

Program Cost:

1. Teachers and administrators are aware of the costs associated with program implementation.
2. Teachers and administrators explore avenues of possible sources of financial support for the program.

Recommendations

A small-scale study of this nature serves to answer only the most preliminary questions about exemplary reading/language arts programs in the state of Illinois. Larger studies involving a larger sample of high-performing schools whose programs are followed over the course of at least one academic year should be conducted. Such a study would permit a more thorough investigation of similarities and differences in program structure and implementation by location, which was not possible with the present study due to a limited sample.

We also recommend that future investigations focus on the day-to-day issues of program implementation. The value of an effective reading/language arts program lies not only in the method of instruction per se but in the quality of implementation.

Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Appendix A: Final Study Sites; Master List of Sites

Final Study Sites for ISBE Reading Study

Elementary

Urban School
Farnsworth Elementary School
Chicago, IL

Suburban School
Juliette Low Elementary School
Arlington Heights, IL

Rural School
Wilder-Waite Elementary School
Peoria, IL

Middle/Junior High

Urban School
Signal Hill Elementary School
Belleville, IL

Northpoint Elementary School
Bloomington, IL

Suburban School
Roosevelt School
River Forest, IL

Rural School
Wilder-Waite Elementary School
Peoria, IL

Fisher Junior/Senior High School
Fisher, IL

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High School

Urban School

Evanston Township High School
Evanston, IL

Suburban

York Community High School
Elmhurst, IL

Rural

Dunlap High School
Dunlap, IL

Master List of Potential Sites for ISBE Reading Study

Elementary

Urban

Farnsworth Elementary School
Carlock Elementary School
Northpoint Elementary School
Hudson Elementary School

Suburban

Juliette Low Elementary School
Black Hawk Elementary School
Madison Elementary School
Winston Churchill Elementary School
Park View Elementary School

Rural

Wilder-Waite Elementary School
Zeigler-Royalton Elementary School
Armstrong-Ellis Elementary School
Shirland C C Elementary School
Hopedale Elementary School
Banner Elementary School

Middle/Junior High Schools

Urban

Bell Elementary School
Morgan Park Junior High School
Northpoint Elementary School
Signal Hill Elementary School

Lincoln Elementary School

Suburban

Stuart R. Paddock Elementary School
Hunting Ridge Elementary School
Roosevelt School
Jane Adams Elementary School
Washington Elementary School

Rural

Wilder-Waite Elementary School
Fisher Junior/Senior High School
Cissna Park Junior High School
Tremont Junior High School
Fairmont Elementary School

Senior High Schools

Urban

Evanston Township High School
Waubonsie Valley High School

Suburban

York Community High School
Naperville High School

Rural

Dunlap High School
Ridgeview High School

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Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Appendix B: Data Collection Instruments

Pathways Home

- Telephone Contact Protocol
- Interview
- Questionnaire: Parts I and II (This questionaire is not available online. To obtain a copy, contact the Illinois State Board of Education, Division of Research and Policy at (217)782-3950)
- Site Visit Guidelines

ISBE Study Telephone Contact Protocol

Below is a suggested format for our contact protocol. I am assuming that we are contacting principals and not superintendents.

> My name is _____, and I am calling from the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL). We are a not-for-profit educational organization that conducts educational research and development in the Midwest region of the U.S. [Have a list of products/project to refer to if necessary.]
>
> We are currently working on a study with the Illinois State Board of Education to study schools with high levels of reading achievement for the past several years. The primary purpose of this study is to describe the types of reading/language arts programs being used at these schools, and to identify the characteristics these programs have in common. Would you consider being a part of this study?
>
> Through a selection process based on student IGAP reading scores, we have identified a group of schools throughout Illinois whose students have demonstrated high levels of achievement in reading for the past several years. Your school is one of those schools. Would you be willing to answer a few questions?
>
> Does your school have a selective admissions policy?
> (If yes, find out what the policy is for that school.)
>
> (For Non-CPS Schools) Do you administer a second standardized test of student achievement? (If yes) What is it?
>
> As part of our study, we would like to administer a questionnaire to some of the teachers on your staff. Also, we would like to interview you about the cost of implementing and maintaining the program. Would you be willing to participate in this study?

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

When would it be convenient for us to visit your school and talk with you about your program?

ISBE Exemplary Reading Study Interview Questions

Name:

Position at School:

School Name:

School Address:

Phone Number:

Date:

Interviewer:

Your school was asked to participate in this study because your students have demonstrated consistently high reading achievement for several years. We are very interested in learning more about your reading/language arts program at the elementary/middle/secondary level. This interview serves two purposes:

- to identify effective program models and instructional approaches throughout the state
- to depict the range of these approaches, the implementation issues, and strategies employed

1. The focus of our interest is on the key features of your program, as well as, program implementation. As background, could you briefly describe the instructional program/approach?

2. What are the demographic and structural characteristics of your school?

   A. How many students? Race/Ethnicity of Students/Average Class Size

   B. How many teachers?

   C. Configuration of classes?

3. How long has the current reading/language arts program been in place?

4. What types of training and staff development are involved in supporting the program?

5. What are some of the resources involved in implementing the program? *Materials and equipment,* includes trade books, commercially prepared instructional materials, number of pages duplicated by teacher or district for consumable or handouts overheads, wall charts, displays (# or extent of materials/time used), use of tape recorders, video, telephone, computers, storage furniture or space if out of the ordinary, other supplies (paper, pencils, audio tapes, drawing supplies).

Source of funding for resources, regular school budget, Title I funds (federal and state), private grant, teacher.

- materials? (type of materials, one-time cost?)

- equipment? (type, one-time cost?)

Personnel time. For frequent activities estimate time involved in hours for a "typical" week during the school year. For less frequent activities estimate hours involved over a "typical" school month or for the entire calendar year -- including summer activities. A number of different aspects of personnel time will be examined (e.g., teacher's own time involved, class aides or paraprofessionals, other teachers in school, department chair, lead teacher, coordinator, librarian, principal, parent or community volunteers, specialists, consultants, district staff, other people involved in activity such as vendors, artists, writers)

Other expenses or resources, including tuition for training or fees for services (e.g., audiologist screening), donated or loaned resources, travel (of personal miles, number of trips for class -- local or distant sites), conference participation (e.g., reading clubs going to state meetings), rewards or parties (e.g., ice cream social for all kids who read 100 books).

Source of funding for resources, regular school budget, Title I funds (federal and state), private grant, teacher.

- In-class instructional activities (type, and cost per type)

- remedial and enrichment activities (type and cost per type)

- instructional planning activities (this includes time spent meeting with others, production of materials, time spent obtaining materials, etc.)

- follow-up activities (grading papers, scoring tests, keeping records, and communicating with parents).

- Professional development activities (self-study, classes, observing other classes, obtaining assistance from others)

- program or curriculum development activities (committee meetings, assessment development, obtaining additional funding for programs or resources)

6. What are your building's textbook policies? How are these policies related to district level policies?

7. Do you use technology to support your reading/language arts program? If so, what is the Internet policy? What is the software policy?

8. How is the program designed to meet the needs of special needs populations?

- ESL

- at-risk

- rural (if a rural school)

- special education

9. What criteria do you use to evaluate how the program is functioning?

10. In what ways were the perceptions and involvement of parents and the wider community tied to the reading/language arts program?

If you have anything documented you can share with us about your program we would appreciate it. (E.g., lesson plans, student work, assessment plans/tools, etc.)

TEACHER QUESTIONAIRE
ISBE Reading/Language Arts

This portion of Appendix B is not available on-line. To obtain a copy, contact the Illinois State Board of Education, Division of Research and Policy at (217)782-3950.

ISBE Reading Study Site Visit Guidelines

Instructions to the researcher: The focus of each session is the completion of the interview and/or questionnaire, as well as the collection of artifacts. The site visit guidelines are comprised of before, during, and after visit suggestions related to each instrument.

Before the site visit

- Become as familiar as possible with each question that is part of the interview.
- Become as familiar as possible with all aspects of the questionnaire. If both the interview and questionnaire are being administered, note areas where they overlap in terms of information requested (e.g., class size).

During the site visit

- Provide as vivid a description as possible of school-wide characteristics, keeping in mind that a profile must be created.

- Provide running observation notes related to each focus area on the interview form, taking care to address every question.

After the visit

- Check notes and resolve any questions by following-up with interviewee.

- Develop a narrative profile of the site. Include as much descriptive information as possible.

- Organize artifacts and highlight outstanding examples of materials, practices, etc.

Annotate your notes with your own observations as you synthesize information from interviews.

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NCREL North Central Regional Educational Laboratory

Exemplary Reading Programs in Illinois Public Schools

Appendix C: Bibliography

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